

When Is Non-writing Writing? or, When Is Writing Non-writing?

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What shall we call non-writing?

Gelb 1952/63	Forerunners of writing	Primitive drawings, Descriptive representational devices, and Identifying-mnemonic devices
Diringer 1948–68	Embryo-writing	Iconography and Sympathetic magic, Mnemonic devices, and Symbolic means of communication
Février 1948/59	<i>Mnémotechnique et synthétique</i>	Knots, Geometric signs, Images, Stylization, Petroglyphs, Pictorial narratives, and Synthetic writing
Cohen 1958	<i>Protoécriture</i>	Non-writing and Pictographic pre-writing
Friedrich 1966	<i>Vorstufen</i>	Object-writing and Pictorial ideography
Jensen 1969		Object-writing and Graphic first stages; then Idea-writing and Pictography

What was writing?

Février 1948/59	« L'écriture est un procédé dont on se sert actuellement pour immobiliser, pour fixer le langage articulé fugitive par son essence même. »
Gelb 1952/63	“A system of intercommunication by means of conventional visible marks.”
Cohen 1958	« une représentation visuelle et durable du langage, qui le rend transportable et conservable »
Diringer 1958	(i) Iconography, (ii) Synthetic or Ideographic, (iii) Transitional or “still better, ... analytic”, (iv) Phonetic (“Syllabic or Alphabetic”), and (v) Alphabetic
Diringer 1962	“the graphic counterpart of speech, the ‘fixing’ of spoken language in a permanent or semi-permanent form ... By means of it, language is made capable of transcending the ordinary conditions of time and space.”
Friedrich 1966	„Der Schrift läßt sich als ein Mittel der Mitteilungen bezeichnen, mit der die Menschen durch ohne weiteres verständliche oder vereinbarte Zeichen räumliche und zeitliche Entfernungen überbrücken wollen.“
Jensen 1969	“The essential characteristics of writing in the true sense [are] twofold, namely: 1. its production by the act of drawing, painting or scratching on a durable writing-material, and 2. the purpose of communicating (to others or, as an aid to the memory, to the writer himself).”

What was writing? (Diringer)

Diringer 1958 (implicit in 1948)	(i) Iconography, (ii) Synthetic or Ideographic, (iii) Transitional or “still better, ... analytic”, (iv) Phonetic (“Syllabic or Alphabetic”), and (v) Alphabetic.
Diringer 1962	Literally and closely defined, writing is the graphic counterpart of speech, the ‘fixing’ of spoken language in a permanent or semi-permanent form, or, in the words of a French scholar, ‘ <i>une représentation visuelle et durable du langage, qui le rend transportable et conservable.</i> ’ By means of it, language is made capable of transcending the ordinary conditions of time and space.

What was writing? (Gelb)

Writing. A system of intercommunication by means of conventional visible marks. See also *Forerunners of Writing* or *Semasiography* and *Phonography*.

Forerunners of Writing. Various devices, grouped together under *Semasiography*, to achieve intercommunication by means of visible marks, expressing meaning but not necessarily linguistic elements. Opposite of *Phonography*.

Semasiography. Forerunners of *Writing*, including the Identifying-Mnemonic and Descriptive-Representational devices, to achieve intercommunication by means of visible marks expressing meaning, but not necessarily linguistic elements. Opposite of *Phonography*.

Phonography. A full *Writing*, that is a system of signs expressing linguistic elements by means of visible marks. Opposite of *Semasiography*.

Identifying-Mnemonic Device. A semasiographic device to convey communication by means of pictures or visible marks, which help to identify or to record certain persons or objects. For example, the drawing of a panther on a shield may convey some general meaning as ‘this shield belongs to the person who killed the panther’.

Descriptive-Representational Device. A semasiographic device to convey communication by means of pictures drawn and grouped in accordance with conventions of figurative art. (Gelb 1952,

What is writing?

Sampson 1985/2015	“script, writing-system, or orthography ... refer to a given set of written marks together with a particular set of conventions for their use [/for using them].” AND To “write” might be defined, at a first approximation, as: to communicate relatively specific ideas by means of permanent, visible marks.”
Daniels 1988–	“A system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer.”
DeFrancis 1989	“Full writing is a system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey any and all thought.”
Coulmas 1989	“1 it consists of artificial graphical marks on a durable surface; 2 its purpose is to communicate something; 3 this purpose is achieved by virtue of the marks’ conventional relation to language.”
Coulmas 1996	“a system of recording language by means of visible or tactile marks which relate in a systematic way to units of speech, for example alphabetic vs logographic writing”
Coulmas 2003	“a system of recording language by means of visible or tactile marks”
Coulmas 2013	“The term writing system ... refers to an abstract type of graphic system. There are only a few such systems, distinguished by their basic operational units: word writing systems, syllabic writing systems, and phonetic writing systems. A secondary meaning of the term refers to the specific rules according to which the units of the system are interpreted in a given language. In the latter sense there are hence many writing systems, in the former only very few.”
Rogers 2005	“the use of graphic marks to represent specific linguistic utterances.”
Sproat 2010	“Writing is a symbol system that represents language.”
Meletis 2020	“Writing represents language by graphic means.”

A DEFINITION OF WRITING

Because I do not feel that petroglyphs, iconographic motifs, and heraldic symbols qualify as writing, I will begin with a definition of early writing in general and proceed to a discussion of early Mesoamerican texts in particular.

1. Writing is recognizable by its format; even when we are unable to read or interpret certain examples of writing, we are able to infer that a certain text is writing by its organization.
2. More than 90 percent of all early writing has a linear format, either in rows (as in the case of Mesopotamia and Egypt) or columns (as in the case of China and the Maya region).
3. This linear format implies the order of reading, either:
 - a. left to right, or right to left;
 - b. top to bottom, or bottom to top.
4. There is some degree of relationship to the spoken language.
5. There is a limited set of conventionalized signs that combine according to specific rules, i.e. “grammar.”

In order to distinguish Mesoamerican writing from its iconographic precursors, we can list four requirements:

1. There must be at least three glyphs, arranged in a row or column.
2. The arrangement must determine reading order.
3. The set of glyphs must show a correspondence to the spoken language.
4. As a consequence, the arrangement must follow grammatical rules.

Mesopotamian chronology I

<i>Period</i>	<i>Writing phase</i>	<i>Historical developments</i>
3400	Clay bullae and numerical tablets	Beginning of large-scale settlement of Babylonia
3300	Late Uruk	Archaic texts from Uruk: Writing Phase Uruk IV
3200		First urban centers
3100		Age of early civilization
3000	Jemdet Nasr	
2900	Early Dynastic I	
2800		Archaic texts from Ur
2700		Formation of large irrigation networks
2600	Early Dynastic II	
2500		Texts from Fara
2500	Early Dynastic III	Rival city-states
2400		Old Sumerian texts

Source: Englund 2004, 25; 1998, 23; etc.

Mesopotamian chronology II

<i>Archeol. age</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>History of writing in (or near) Mesopotamia</i>	
		Uruk period	4000–3100	
			first writing	
Early Bronze	Ninevite V	Jemdet Nasr period	3100–2900	
		Early Dynastic period	2900–2350	
		Akkadian dynasty	2350–2150	
		Ur III dynasty	2112–2004	
			writing Akkadian	
Middle Bronze	Old Assyrian period	2000–1600	Old Babylonian period	2000–1600
Late Bronze	Mittanni period	1600–1350	Kassite dynasty	1574–1157
	Middle Assyrian period	1350–1100	Middle Babylonian period	1400–1100
			(Hurrian); Kassite (Ugaritic)	
Iron Age	Neo-Assyrian empire		Neo-Babylonian period	1000–539
			Assyrian rule	750–625
			Neo-Babylonian kingdom	625–612
			Neo-Babylonian empire	612–539
			(Phoenician, Aramaic)	
(Iranian)		Achaemenid dynasty	539–331	Elamite, O.Pers., Aram.
(Greek)		Macedonian rule	331–323	
		Hellenistic (Seleucid)	323–138	
(Iranian)		Parthian empire	138 BCE – 224 CE	Parthian
		Sassanian empire	224 CE – 636/37	Middle Persian

After <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/02/wam.html> and related pages.

Chronology of Mesoamerican pre-literacy and literacy

	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Language (language family)</i>
Olmec	(1250)–300 BCE (La Venta)	(Mixe-Zoque?)
Zapotec	500 BCE – 900 CE	Zapotec (Oto-Manguen)
Teotihuacan	100 BCE – 550 CE	several? esp. Nahuatl??
Epi-Olmec/Isthmian	142 CE, 156 CE (La Mojarra)	(Mixe-Zoque?)
Maya	before 292 – after 909 CE	Ch'olan (Mayan)
Mixtec	1000–1600 CE	Mixtec (Oto-Manguen)
Aztec	colonial?	Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan)

Marcus 1992, 2020; Taube 2000; M. Jensen 1992; Whittaker 1992, 2021.

Archeological chronology of Mesoamerica

<i>Mesoamerica</i>	<i>Approximate date</i>
Colonial era begins	1521–1550 CE
Late Post-Classic	1300–1521 CE
Early Post-Classic	900–1300 CE
Late Classic	600–900 CE
Early Classic	250–600 CE
Terminal Formative	1 BCE – 250 CE
Late Formative	300–1 BCE
Middle Formative	850–300 BCE
Early Formative	1900–850 BCE
Preceramic	11,000–1900 BCE
Late Ice Age	15,000–11,000 BCE

After Marcus 2020, 4.

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